

A lifeless church will decline in an ever-changing culture

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

I am probably going to cross a line with some of my readers with this article. It is one that most architects who design churches would not ordinarily cross because of the fear of losing a potential church client.

But it is something that needs to be discussed, not as though it were a complaint or a lament that things aren't being done as they were in the past, but in love for the church.

The truth is that American culture is changing and churches are changing with it. All over this nation, churches are desperately seeking the model that helps them keep the people they already have and promotes growth as well.

At the center of our cultural change is the growing acceptance of dependency. We depend on our i-phones and i-pads to keep us connected with the world around us. We depend on an agricultural industry to feed us. We depend on our government to protect us and to provide for the poor and the indigent. In short, we are becoming a society that increasingly believes that more of our needs and wants are rights, and that we should depend on others that are authority figures to provide for us and to occupy our minds, especially with entertainment.

We can see it as we never have in this election cycle. When have we ever had presidential candidates who blatantly and openly avow socialism? Yes, progressivism (which some define as socialism without the violence) began a hundred years ago with the likes of Woodrow Wilson, but no one since then (that I recall) ever said the words "I am a socialist" or "I am a progressive" with such bravado.

More troubling is the acceptance of this by a growing sector of the American population, and as it grows, it spills over into American churches. As it does the culture begins to become one that says that anything should be permissible, even in the church.

Architects are trained to listen to their clients and translate the client's wants and needs into a built environment. For secular projects, this is a practice that works very well. In fact, where an architect presumes to know more about the client's needs than the client does, then the outcome is not likely to be as successful.

This does not presume that the architect should not use his or her expertise or to express opinions. Much of architecture is technical in nature, and it is much of the reason that architects are needed on building projects.

But churches are different. Churches have a spiritual aspect that cannot be ignored. Not that the building itself is spiritual or holy, because nothing in scripture calls us to build holy spaces. The exception to this, of course, was the Temple, but that is a wholly different situation than churches of the New Testament.

The reality is that church buildings are a reflection of two critical aspects. The first is that the building represents what the people of that congregation believe, and the second is that it represents their financial ability to build what they believe they need. This, I believe, is a universal characteristic of all church design since church design began soon after Jesus came to this earth.

If this is true, and I believe that it is, then we can gain some knowledge about a congregation, even one that no longer exists, simply by looking at their building. Even more, we can gain insight into that congregation's standing with its community by looking at where the building is located and the outward expression (the design) that is presented to its community.

But the physical aspect of the building is not the only indication of cultural change with churches, nor should it be the most important one; how the building and facilities are used is a much greater index of the spiritual facet of the church.

This is where I will lose some of you, if you are not willing to listen to some constructive criticism. I know how dangerous it is to say anything that can be perceived as negative about the church, and how easy for some who don't like criticism to believe me to be attempting to quench the Holy Spirit. Before you think that of me, I beg you to listen.

Many churches are dying because they have become boring and lifeless. New churches are exciting places (as I believe they should be) that are achieving much of their growth through the demise of older churches. The church, I believe, should be modeled after the gifts of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul speaks of in scripture.

But when a church never becomes functional around these gifts, they foster dependency on its leaders. When worship does not include prayer, when scripture is not taught, when commandments of Jesus regarding baptism and communion are neglected or ignored, when truth is not taught because it hurts giving or might affect attendance, then is it a church or just a club?

I agree this column isn't long enough to be fair about this subject, but it is one that I believe churches need to face declining culture.



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